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Teaching Values in Social Work

oral history interview with

Kermit T. Wiltse

1989

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The Bay Area Social Work Oral History Project

KERMIT WILTSE

TEACHING VALUES IN SOCIAL WORK

An Interview Conducted by
Robert G. Larsen and Isabelle Maynard
in October and November 1989

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PREFACE

The Bay Area Social Work Oral History Project

The following interview is the eighth in a series of tape-recorded oral histories of social work in the Bay Area. Social work has changed character in recent years and the flavor of a past era is being lost. Social work, growing out of the Depression and the passage of the Social Security Act went through an exciting process of innovation and change.

The Bay Area Social Work Oral History Project was created to obtain autobiographical interviews from journeyman social workers who participated in this era. Our hope is to maintain a history of the profession, to provide a sense of continuity to younger social workers who might read these histories, and to preserve the recollections of a group of dedicated social workers.

We extend our thanks to James Leiby of the School of Social Work for his encouragement in the initiation of his project, to Willa Baum of the Regional Oral History Office at the University of California, Berkeley for her continued interest and advice, and to Shirley Cooper and Verneice Thompson for their support in continuing these oral histories.

Isabelle Maynard

Robert Larsen

Project Directors

21 February 1990
The Bay Area Social Work Oral History Project
1305 Macdonald Ave.
Richmond, California 94801

THE BAY AREA SOCIAL WORK ORAL HISTORY SERIES

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|----|--------------------|------|
| 1. | Ted Tarail | 1985 |
| 2. | Sarabelle McCleery | 1986 |
| 3. | Donald H. Fibush | 1986 |
| 4. | Edgar W. Pye | 1987 |
| 5. | Esther Fibush | 1987 |
| 6. | Shirley Cooper | 1987 |
| 7. | Verneice Thompson | 1988 |
| 8. | Red Stephenson | 1988 |
| 9. | Kermit Wiltse | 1989 |

INTERVIEW HISTORY

Kermit T. Wiltse narrated this oral history in three sessions on Oct 19, 1889, November 2, 1989 and November 16, 1989. All three interviews were done at his home in Berkeley. The conditions there were ideal for an interview, quiet and without interruption. Isabelle Maynard met with Dr. Wiltse prior to the interview to develop a list of topics that served to focus the interviews. A copy of the proposed list of interview topics was given to Kermit Wiltse before the interviews began.

The transcript was prepared by Robert Larsen. A draft copy was mailed to Dr. Wiltse. He performed a thorough review of the material. There were a number of changes made for clarity and grammatical improvement. Some of the interview was deleted. All of these changes were incorporated in the final draft. The final copy, index and front pages were prepared by Robert Larsen.

RESUME

KERMIT T. WILTSE
Professor Emeritus 1950-1982
School of Social Welfare
University of California
Berkeley, California 94720

Education: AB, University of North Dakota, 1937
University of Minnesota, School of Social Work, 1937
MA, University of Chicago, School of Social Service Administration, 1940
DSW, University of Pittsburgh, 1950

Experience: Child Welfare Worker, North Dakota Public Welfare Board, 1937-1939
Case Supervisor, Cass County (North Dakota) Welfare Board, 1940-1942
U.S. Army, 1942-1945
Instructor in Social Work, University of North Dakota, 1945-1948
Assistant Professor, Associate Professor, and Professor, School of
Social Welfare, University of California, Berkeley, 1950 -
Associate Dean, 1965-1972
Coordinator, Public Welfare Research Projects Center, 1962-1970

Awards: Koshland Award, California Conference of Social Welfare, 1961
Citation, California Social Workers Organization, 1961. For contri-
butions to public welfare.
Fullbright Award, Italy, 1965

Publications:

"Social Casework in Public Assistance," California State Department of Social
Welfare, Sacramento, 1952. 35 pages.

"Social Casework Services in the Aid to Dependent Children Program," Social
Service Review. Vol. 28, No. 2, June 1954.

"Education and Social Welfare," Annals of the American Academy of Political and
Social Sciences, Vol. 302, November 1955.

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California, Berkeley. 49 pages.

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Work) 1959.

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Wiltse, D.S.W., (eds.), Pacific Books, Palo Alto, California, 1963. 269 pages and
appendix

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A Study of the Administration of the AID to Needy Children Program. Report to the Public Welfare Department, San Francisco County, September 1959, 87 pages.

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A Study of Family and Child Serving Agencies in Santa Clara County, Community Welfare Council of Santa Clara, San Jose, 1952. 46 pages.

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One of six co-authors of Sixth Edition of above text; contributed Chapter 1 plus Chapter 6, "Social Services in Public Welfare," pp. 105-118.

"Hardcore Youth Unemployment" with Robert Forthman, Journal of Public Social Services, Vol. 2, No. 1, March 1971.

"Student Ratings and Teacher Effectiveness: A Reappraisal" with Michael Kolevzon, Education for Social Welfare, Vol. 9, No. 7, Spring 1973.

"Foster Care, 1973: A Reappraisal" No. 1, Winter 1974, with Eileen Gambrill;
"Foster Care: Plans and Actualities" No. 2, Spring 1974, with Eileen Gambrill;
"Foster Care: Prescriptions for Change" No. 3, Summer 1974, with Eileen Gambrill;
"Foster Care: The Use of Contracts" No. 4, Fall 1974, with Theodore Stein and Eileen Gambrill. All four articles published in Public Welfare, Vol. 32.

"Decision Making Needs in Foster Care," Children Today, Vol. 5 (6) Nov./Dec. 1976.

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Conceptual Statement on Case Management for Family and Children's Services, Kermit T. Wiltse and Linda Remy. Distributed by National Child Welfare Training Center, University of Michigan School of Social Work, Ann Arbor, 1983.

"Home Based Services: Implications for the Future," Keynote address, Pacific Lutheran University, Tacoma, Washington, Conference on Home Based Services for Families and Children, May 1-3, 1983.

Community Service

Member of Boards

AASK (Aid to Adoption of Special Kids) Oakland
Coleman Children and Youth Services, San Francisco
CASR (Court Appointed Special Representative) Concord

Member of Management Committee, Media Center, Lutheran Church of the Cross, Berkeley

INTERVIEW WITH KERMIT WILTSE

BOB LARSEN: This is Bob Larsen and Isabelle Maynard. We are in the Berkeley home of Dr. Wiltse who we are interviewing this evening. It is October 19, 1989. Dr. Wiltse, would you tell us about your family?

Early Years in North Dakota

KERMIT WILTSE: I was born in North Dakota on a farm which would be considered a very poor farm in what was called the Sand Hills and later was taken over by the government during the Depression years because it was such poor land it was useless for anything but pasturage. But, even though I speak of being poor, being born poor, it was not a poverty background in the sense of like you see today in the hillbillies or something. In fact, we thought of ourselves as maybe just a cut above our community because we were one of the few Scotch-Irish, as against mostly a Norwegian community. Even though I married a Norwegian and so forth, there was possibly a little bit of looking down your nose because they were generally Norwegians who migrated, the first generation, and they were the Norwegians who couldn't make it in their own country, who were poor in their own country and migrated.

I don't want to talk much about this but I thought of myself not as poor, but just as a member of a big family. As I said before, I am the youngest of ten, and of those ten only three of us have finished college, the three youngest boys. The two girls, they both finished high school. Other than that none of the older brothers went beyond the eighth grade or maybe one year of high school. So the idea of going on to college was not in the culture of that community. I don't exactly know where I picked it up. I don't think I ever felt pressured by my parents, especially by my mother [Mary Bell], except a very general pressure. She expected a lot of us. She thought of us as capable, I suppose.

When I was in high school I recall the principal asking us how many were going on to college. There were two or three in the class, I suppose a class of 20 or so, and how many were determined and I guess I was the only one. I didn't think of it as determined, I just assumed I would. But, to go to college meant I worked my way through. There was in those day--it came along at just the right time--it was called the National Youth Administration, which you have probably all heard of. It was the youth version of the WPA. We earned \$15 a month and surplus commodities. I know my brother and I rented a light housekeeping room for \$5 a month and I had plenty of money. It meant that we lived simply, but we could live quite well.

It turned out that all three of the boys who were educated, as I say, finished at the same time. I don't want to make anything of this, but two of us were Phi Bates and he was a member of the Commerce Fraternity, whatever that was.

BOB LARSEN: What town of North Dakota was this?

KERMIT WILTSE: It was country. The nearest town was Venlo which has disappeared completely, nothing there anymore. The county seat was 16 miles away. The nearest town of consequence was 11 miles. By consequence you meant a village. But Venlo was just a store, an elevator and stockyards. And a dance hall. That was the focus of much wonderful experience as a child.

Father's background

BOB LARSEN: Do you know how it was that your family came to that place?

KERMIT WILTSE: By a process I say of--I don't exaggerate this. My father [William J. Wiltse] did not do well at farming. It was not his dish. He should never have been a farmer. He should have been an educated man. Oddly, his parents, I think both of them were teachers. As I said before, I am the eleventh generation in this country. In all those generations there tends to be a lot of teachers, etc. particularly teachers, some doctors, etc. But he was not educated beyond the eighth grade and he should have been.

To say how he got there, it was poor land and poor country. He was a poor farmer. He never should have left Iowa where he originally came from. Originally when they were first married they moved to Minnesota. He never should have left Minnesota because it was much better country. Then he lived in town awhile just as a drayman or something and then wound up on this poor farm which, in a sense, he lost. There were farmers in the area, not the immediate area, but around Sheldon, for example, where my wife comes from, that were well to do and successful farmers, even though that whole decade of the '20s and '30s were very bad for farming generally.

Mother's background

BOB LARSEN: Did your mother come from the same kind of a background?

KERMIT WILTSE: Yes, she was really old American too, not quite as old American, but my great-great-grandfather was at Valley Forge (I think that's right) on her side and the Civil War and everything. There was supposedly--this was my father's side--according to the New York Archives something like 93 Wiltses in the Revolution. On the other side, Tigner which is my middle

name, was at Valley Forge and he was also probably at the battle of Yorktown. But that's kind of--I want to make a point to try to summarize it--they come from very old American stock. There's no Wiltsees that have ever been, as far as I know, members of cabinets or anything.

ISABELLE MAYNARD: Was this history discussed much in the family?

KERMIT WILTSE: Well, my mother somewhat. But my parents essentially separated about the time I was three or four years old. Not that my father was out of our life, but he wasn't really around and he wasn't part of either the family economy or the intimate family living. One of my older brothers was actually sort of the male head of the house, the oldest brother at home. In that sense, throughout life I did not have a father except as father substitutes. I had so many brothers. But, I guess that's enough.

Childhood activities

BOB: What were your childhood activities?

KERMIT: Work! [Laughs] Yeah, we really started working on the farm and helping out awfully early, but with that many siblings around we always really had a pretty good time. By that I mean winter was a time of lots of games. We played cards and authors, that you don't hear about very much any more, various kinds of games. And school was the center of activities and the PTA and so forth. We always were in Christmas programs and that kind of stuff. We worked on the farm and herded cattle. By the time I was five or six years old I was taking the cattle out to herd. So we had a sort of a small ranch and farm life.

ISABELLE: Could you describe the farm?

KERMIT: You mean the original one?

ISABELLE: Yes.

KERMIT: It was about, it probably added up to about a section of land part of which was farmed and then there were pastures. It was within a half mile of the river so there were woods. The major activity, recreation activity especially since I was the youngest (I was a little older before I had to get out on the cultivator) I would go off into the woods and wander around. I always carried a .22 and I hunted gophers. We sold gopher tails. So I always had spending money because I could always catch gophers.

BOB: What's a gopher worth?

KERMIT: A gopher is, I guess, technically a ground squirrel, but there are these stripe-ed gophers (most people would pronounce it striped). We called them stripe-eds or stripe-ees, and pocket gophers the kind that are just a mole really. We could earn quite a bit on them and you could also, if you could get them, crows. You would cut off their heads and trade those in for ten cents apiece. That was real money. Ten cents, that was about an hour's wage typically for hard farm work. So a crow head or even three cents for a gopher tail was a way of really making spending money.

The celebrations in town like 16 miles away when we could get in there on the old Ford model T was the Fourth of July, Play Day, usually two or three others, but particularly the Fourth of July. We sort of lived for that.

ISABELLE: Did you have any special relationship with any of your other nine siblings?

KERMIT: Well, to a certain extent I suppose I am a little closer to my sisters. My older sister [Edna] is still living. She is nearly 92 now. She sort of mothered us and was a substitute to some extent. My younger sister [Wilna] was always I would say would be described as close and not close. For example, and I just thought of it yesterday, none of siblings, and I am one of seven still living, not one of them has called me to see if we are OK. [Referring to the recent earthquake.] Several other people have, but they just assumed we were OK.

I'll correct that. The other morning my brother did call me. He called me in the middle of the night so I have almost forgotten. I was feeling, "Why in the heck did you wake me up?" At the same time we have reunions and we are all together. We're quite compatible, but I can't say I was ever intimate with any of them in the sense like to my closest friends, male friends, who are social workers or somebody close that I have gone to school with or in college with here at the university. On the other hand my closest women friends are either social workers or colleagues.

It is partly that I am the only one that went they way I did. Of the three of us I think my mother was disappointed that I didn't go into law or something really established like that. And my brother [L. L.] just older than I am, he is a surgeon. He is really the model of the ideal, I'm not. A social worker and a democrat, liberal and to most of them a left winger. I think that there is a little bit of not true compatibility on that score, because we just don't agree on about half of what is important in this world. So in that sense we are not close, you see, but in another sense we get together usually every year or so and I see them. There is a kind a closeness. I think sometimes families are that way.

I think most people think of us as kind of secretive, my wife [Jane Neffett] does. I'll just not tell people things. Ordinarily she'd say, "Why are you secretive about it?" "Well, it just wasn't anybody's business." We always had. We didn't share girlfriends, we didn't discuss it. Never in my life would it occur to me to tell my brothers about how I felt about a girl. It just wouldn't occur to me. They could guess at it, but they couldn't hear it from me.

ISABELLE: How about your mother's influence on you?

KERMIT: I would say that is paramount, clearly paramount. She was pretty warm and wonderful. But with ten kids I can't say that there was any favoritism really. I can't say I was more or less, but I was the youngest, the baby the longest, but I think she was evenhanded, which is kind of remarkable. At least it seemed like she would be to me. And, she was devoted to us. She was not educated in the sense she finished only the eighth grade, I suppose. But she read a lot, not very demanding stuff. Cowboy stories and so forth, but she read a great deal. We always had lots of books around. I read, from the time I can remember, I always had books when I was out herding cattle or anything where I could read.

BOB: Can you remember a favorite book?

KERMIT: [Laughs] Of the childhood books one of my favorites was an Edgar Rice Burroughs book. I can't say the name of it any more, but he was one of the early science fiction writers. Now I don't read it ever. I just ignore it, but then it was a Christmas gift and I read it. That's about the only thing. I know there was one earlier than that, the "Merry Little Breezes" and so forth. "Tom Sawyer" was a little later on. But, we read almost anything we could get our hands on.

Growing up in Lisbon

The nearest library was in Lisbon. It was a tiny library at that. When I was in high school we moved closer to Lisbon. I went to high school in Lisbon. It was three and a half miles away and I walked back and forth pretty much. Then I had access to library books. We'd go in in winter time during Christmas vacation, walk in and get books for my mother and ourselves. We did have an old Edison Victrola, one of these little things with the cylinders. That provided lots of entertainment.

There was, as I said, in summer time, there were wonderful dances, they seemed wonderful to me at this bowery in Venlo only two miles away. It was once a week. Of course, I was too young to dance, but you could watch the older ones dance.

BOB: By a bowery you mean an open air dance?

KERMIT: It was originally without any lid on in at all. Eventually they put a tent over it. I mean a canvas top. The side walls were just high enough so you could lean on them standing on the outside. There were benches inside, but we preferred to range around outside. It was a lower class community in one sense, that's apropos to say. It seemed to me that there was more--I hesitate, you shouldn't use a class term. They drank a lot. There was always moonshine. And we used to say, the dance would go on until about 2 o'clock and then we would watch the fights until daylight.

A number of years later when we were living near Lisbon, three and a half miles, our barn burned down and we put up a new one. Of course, it was customary to have dances, but anyway we had a crop failure and we had nothing to do so we ran barn dances all summer and made a little money on it too. I sold malts and suppers and things, but that was when I was 17 or 18.

There too, the culture was in one sense kind of what I haven't seen since. Literally, they would do lots of quarreling and the fights were interesting. Sometimes there was more yelling than anything else. But that was part of our folklore, all these things and these sayings and so forth, and the things that we picked up from the hassling that they did. The half drunk carryings on. My brothers weren't part of that. They simply weren't part of that at all. They weren't big men either which may make some difference, but there were some big guys in the area. But they weren't part of it and I was never part of it. I'm sure we looked down our nose at that kind of rowing. That was just beneath us.

Elementary school

BOB: How did you get to elementary school? Or were you taught at home?

KERMIT: No. It was four miles. We attended every day. We were farthest. On that side of the school we were the farthest away, four miles. So, for quite a few years we drove a bus. That meant not a bus, but a sled in the winter, a covered sled in the winter, and a buggy or something in the summer. Sometimes we picked up neighbors. We got a little bit from the township for it. A little bit was allowed for taking them and we'd take the Van Horns and the Dahls and so forth. But, later on we drove a horse and buggy for a good many years. Rode a horse quite a bit. Walked quite a bit in nice weather. But in the winter you couldn't walk that far, it was just too cold. We had a little bus which was covered. We froze a lot. We always had--everybody did--you always had colds. You know what chilblains are?

ISABELLE: Sort of.

KERMIT: Yeah, the skin on your feet around your toes and so forth freeze. It didn't deep freeze but it was frozen and then when it thaws out it itches like crazy. We'd be stamping our feet all the time in the school. The teacher tried to make us quiet, but your feet itched so badly and there was nothing you could do about it. It really itched. But, that was simply from freezing the surface.

ISABELLE: Did you have a favorite teacher in those early years?

KERMIT: I liked all my teachers. I never had a disfavorite. I suppose the first one, my first grade teacher, was named Elise Austad. I was in love with her really. The teachers, of course, in those days were, I think without exception, women teachers. It was a two room school, but we considered it a big school. It was called a consolidated school. Two rooms, so you always had three or four grades in the same room. But, I can't think of a favorite teacher, per se. Anyone I identify with that I got a great deal from especially, except the first one. She was probably more impressive than any of the others.

Decision to attend college

The same could be said for high school. I didn't really have any particular favorite teacher. Lisbon High School was a school where the largest classes were about 60. It was considered a big, big school. There were about 200 in the high school.

BOB: You said earlier that the teacher queried the class: Who wanted to go to college?

KERMIT: That was in high school.

BOB: How did you arrive at that determination?

KERMIT: I just don't know, Bob. I simply can't entirely answer that. I just don't know. In fact, I don't think I had really verbalized it until asked. And maybe I hadn't really determined it until I was asked. Suddenly I realized I was the only one that was holding up his hand. I don't remember; I think we were sophomores, but I'm not absolutely sure of that. And that's about the way it worked out. I was the only one of that group that went on to college.

BOB: Was that considered "different" by your class mates?

KERMIT: Yes. Obviously it was. Typically, even to modern times, the girls get married right out of high school or sometimes rush it. The typical pattern for women then and still is most of them still go right through high school and within a

year or two are married. Some are even less than that. Among my nieces and nephews, with one or two exceptions most of them got married right after high school. Even with this second generation, particularly nieces, get married right out of high school. The boys sometimes wait a little longer. It just seems like I evolved the determination right at that moment to go on to college.

ISABELLE: Did you have at that moment an idea of what you were going to go to college for?

KERMIT: No I didn't. I'd never heard of social work, of course. Never heard of it. I can still remember I was in, I think, a sophomore or junior in college and a very close friend of mine I had gone to high school with started talking about social work and both of us got ourselves interested in it right then. It was, to my folks, like saying I was going to become something strange, a profession they had never heard of. I'm talking about 1935 probably, or 1936.

When I finished undergraduate work in '37, I went on to the University of Minnesota in social work. But how I arrived at the choice of social work was not after long and careful planning. And, I have been told this (she never said it to me) that my mother always blamed a certain professor at the University for getting me involved in social work. I suppose to a certain extent she is right. But the word "blamed" is always put on it which tells you pretty much what she thought.

She was, I would say, a rock-ribbed Republican only because her parents were. Several of the sibs are not (of course I'm not at all) but it is still a factor in our background. Her Republicanism was an inherited thing, just the way she was, not a fundamental philosophy.

Social Institutions in North Dakota

BOB: How were social problems dealt with in your community, particularly during the Depression?

KERMIT: Well, now you are getting up to when I was in school, I finished high school in '33 and started right into the university program. My impression is that social problems weren't dealt with at all. Social institutions were very primitive. There was a non-sectarian orphan asylum in Fargo, 60 miles away, and a Lutheran and a Catholic orphanage in Fargo also. But other than orphanages, there had been a poor farm just west of Lisbon, but by the time I knew about it, it had ceased to be a poor farm. There was still a poor farm in Fargo. Most counties still had a poor farm and that's where their poor were kept.

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Poor farms

Where there was not a poor farm the poor were cared for by the County Clerk. He literally carried grocery orders in his back pocket. That was the way the poor were taken care of. But of course, it was only in extremis that anybody was taken care of. When I was case supervisor in Fargo in 1939 (I started there as a case supervisor in '39) the poor farm was still operating in Cass County, the largest county in the state. It was maybe a mile outside of town and it was right out of Dickens. You couldn't draw a stereotype and get it any more accurate than if you had taken pictures of that place. The physical plant, the appearance of the people there, and the reasons they were there--poverty, alcoholism, and various kinds of afflictions--the same as in Colonial times.

In addition to the orphanages there was also a place for the handicapped in Cass County in 1939. It was full of younger handicapped people. There was the state school for the mentally retarded, a state hospital for the mentally ill, a state school for the blind and one for the deaf. I got to know all these to some extent while at the University and later when a case supervisor. They were spotted around the state. The state penitentiary was in Bismark, the capitol. The state school for the delinquent was right across the river in Mandan. Typical of the rural states, they spotted institutions around the state, but if you had a deaf child or a blind child, or mentally retarded child, the child went away for the entire year really, and parents didn't see their handicapped child except for summer visits. This separation was true up to modern times.

Development of the public welfare system

At the beginning of the Depression years, North Dakota had very little public services except the county poor farms and the county clerk system, which as you know, goes back to Elizabethan poor law. The law says that you have to take care of the poor. Almost overnight the state had to build a welfare system. It came along quickly; first old age assistance, then aid to the blind, then aid to dependent children, and a massive increase in outdoor relief or public assistance. Certification of the able bodied poor to WPA, the youth to CCC, were also responsibilities of a newly created county welfare agency system.

All these programs rapidly coalesced into a county welfare system with each county having a board of public welfare, and a state board of public welfare. This system took over from the old board of institutions. Because it was created new with no preconditions, it turned out to be pretty good, I think initially one of the best in the country. In fact, I've often said that North Dakota had a better system than California, which had a national reputation in 1950 as one of the best. North Dakota's

was even better and I think it probably still is. People get better care in North Dakota today because the population has hardly grown and there is not an overload on the system. The population of North Dakota in the 1930's was just over 600,000, and I think it is still less than 700,000. It is a state that produces people as it has a substantial birthrate and the greatest longevity in the country. The state's principle export is people. North Dakotans are considered good employees everywhere because by and large they are generally North European; German-Lutheran, Norwegians, Swedes, and so forth, with a great work ethic.

As an example, when my wife's sister was out here during the war years looking for a job, she was asked her origin and religion. When she said, "North Dakota Lutheran" she was told that was all that was necessary to know about her. You probably know this, Bob, they the U. S. Department of Employment had a deliberate policy of exporting North Dakota people from the Mid-West during World War II and bringing in people from Arkansas and Missouri to work on the farms. The Norwegian-Lutherans with their powerful work ethic were prized for the defense industries.

BOB: You're making me smile.

Displaced farmers

KERMIT: I think it was deliberate policy. When I was a case supervisor in Fargo at the beginning of the war, we had a large population around the edge of Fargo of disinherited farm workers. Some may have been small farmers and got washed out, but most of them were farm laborers, and they just didn't have any jobs and they lived in shanty towns at the city's edges. Many of them had families. We had to carry them as "unemployable" because they had no education, and no skills except farm work. They weren't needed any more. Came the war and the defense industries in '38 and '39 these men would come to the welfare office and say, "If you take care of my family, I can get a job in Washington or California." We sent them west by the thousands. In a few months, that whole "unemployable" category disappeared.

BOB: You bought them a bus ticket?

KERMIT: No, no we didn't. By and large they rode the rails. Some may have had enough money to take a bus. But we did say, "Yes, your family will be OK until you can send for them." It was the best possible solution. I don't think it was announced as a public policy. Everybody knew we were doing it. It was mostly these larger towns like Fargo that had large collections of farm laborers around the edges. Small towns had some too.

Undergraduate Work

BOB: I think we had better get back to college. And find out how you got in.

KERMIT: Well, in 1937 I hadn't really had any plans, but the University of North Dakota had severe budget cuts, and had to lay off professors. I can't exactly explain the dynamics of it. The university arranged in one or two places in the state on an experimental basis an extension program. They located one in Lisbon, right in my home town. It was really university extension, but we had two teachers full time from the university, one in math and the other in English and social sciences who were there to help us, but we were essentially extension students. So I, along with about 20 other Lisbon people, did a whole year that way, my whole freshman year. It was not equal to attending classes, but we did a lot of reading, a lot of talking and a lot of interacting with the professors. One was a very gifted man in English. He had been a dean who became a victim of budget reduction.

The next year I went to the University in Grand Forks. The first year was relatively inexpensive because I lived at home. Somehow my mother came up with the money for fees for the second year. They were not very much. The second year my brother just older and I went to the University together. He had been out two years teaching in a small country school. He had a year at Ellendale State Normal School, a teacher's college, so we both entered as sophomores. Then the third year my brother, Ellis, the third one up, who also had been teaching, came to the University and we all three shared light house keeping rooms together for our junior and senior years. We were all in the same class, one in commerce, one in pre-med, and myself in social sciences. Our interests are quite disparate. I worked on NYA, and they had saved a little bit from their teaching and each paid his own way.

ISABELLE: Did you talk a lot or a little about politics and social problems, either with your brothers or in the school?

KERMIT: With classmates, not my brothers. Our interests were quite disparate. We never interacted in an intimate personal way. Personal things were shared with friends, not with siblings. I can't say I am politically highly conversant with any of my siblings. In fact, we to some extent still avoid politics because I am too different from most of them. We always had different friends. Actually we didn't have many friends at the university because we could afford very little social life. I had one close personal friend who had been to high school with me and we went to the University together. I don't recall that Leon or Ellis did have any particularly close personal friends. As an NYA student in my sophomore year I worked as a janitor. By the third year apparently I had distinguished myself a little bit in sociology and became a student assistant in sociology.

Government and social problems

My professor's name was V. M. Gillette. He was nationally known as a rural sociologist, which was a branch of sociology at that time. It never went much beyond North Dakota. In those times he was considered a socialist. He had been educated as a minister, left the Methodist church and professed to be an atheist. In many ways a very fine teacher, socratic in his methods and confrontive, he was intolerant of loose thinking. I admired him at the time. He lived on for many years there, and was always, I learned later, somewhat in dutch with the political scene in North Dakota because he was too radical.

I remember one thing clearly from a speech he gave at a state conference when he was the president. His conception of government was that it was the purpose of government to deal with social problems. Social control is quite secondary to social treatment. This goes back to one of the things you asked. We had lots of problems, social problems at that time, and in his conception government ought to be used to solve social problems. Hardly a radical notion anymore, but in those days it was radical. I am reminded, for example, of the time the State of Nebraska loaned money to farmers for seed after a severe drought, an action condemned as socialism realized. Loaning farmers money for seed is socialism!

It didn't take me long to realize that was a patent nonsense, a ridiculously limited conception of the role of government. Ever since then I have been extremely to the left in that I believe our country has wasted time, energy, and treasure constructing a conspiracy of communism (or a conspiracy of socialism). I think even as a teenager I knew there was something foolish about that notion. I certainly did after the war. But, the "evil empire" notion persists. I believe America misses the opportunity to deal much more realistically with the rest of the world because we have this profound American ethos, I guess you would say this conspiracy conception surrounding the concept of socialism. During the Depression years North Dakota was an experimental laboratory in solve social problems, and an ideal moment to be associated with a man like Gillette. He, perhaps, more than anyone, pointed me toward social work.

BOB: You graduated with a degree in sociology?

University of Minnesota

KERMIT: I was a dual major in sociology and psychology. Then I went right to the University of Minnesota for a couple of quarters in social work, and came back to the state as a child welfare worker.

BOB: What was being taught in social work school?

KERMIT: Casework. The very beginnings of psychiatric lectures. Hyman Lippman, a well known psychoanalyst, lectured on psychoanalytic theory, which seemed to most people brand new and shining and exotic, mostly exotic, at that time. Statistics. Something that would probably be called social policy later on. A course in housing, a course in law. Fieldwork, of course. I had a quarter of fieldwork in Minnesota in public assistance and a quarter in protective services.

It wasn't much different two or three years later when I was at the University of Chicago. Not really much. A bit more sophisticated, but not much. I think the level of teaching was pretty low, in retrospect it seemed like that. Charlotte Towle, the great Charlotte Towle, was my casework teacher. Edith Abbott; it was probably her last year. She taught a course in what I guess would pass for social policy. Sophonisba P. Breckinridge, I took a course from her. Wayne McMillen was at Chicago. I am talking about '39 and '40 when I was at the University of Chicago in the Master's program.

BOB: I'd like to know, how did Sophonisba impress you?

KERMIT: She was in her dotage. She would come to class and she was like a leaf, just like a leaf. She must have weighed all of 60 pounds. About once every third period she would drop some little pearl that was so nacreous that it was worth it. But, by and large it was a waste of time. I don't know if she was ever a good teacher, but she was really beyond the stage where she should be teaching.

Edith Abbott quite the contrary. She had a voice, you know, she never had to use a microphone. Here was this little patrician looking woman dressed to the nines always in black dresses and looking like someone out of a book. Of course, she was old-fashioned, but she was always just immaculately dressed. She could fill a room with her magnificent voice. She was in many ways a very good teacher. She used her own book where this excerpt came about, feeding seagulls and so forth, things like that, she put together into a book. Edith Abbott, I can't think of the title. I have it downstairs. It really traced through excerpts the applications of the poor law in this country and in England. She was a good teacher. Very good in many ways, very good. I can't think of any other teachers, but I would say Chicago was good in everything except the casework teaching.

BOB: What was Charlotte Towle like?

KERMIT: Old, a bit of a Vera Vague I always thought. Compared to the University of Pittsburgh in 1948, 1949, into '50, when I studied with Grace Marcus and Ruth Smalley, and with Gertrude Wilson, Gladys Ryland, and Dean Newstetter. At least those first

two or three, especially Marcus had a mind like a razor, And Smalley was awfully good. Florence Poole was awfully good, so the casework teaching and the social work teaching at Pittsburgh was miles ahead. Of course, when we consider Minnesota in '37, Chicago in '39 and '40, as against '48 and '49 after the war when I was at Pittsburgh, we could expect teaching to have improved. Partly this was due to some darn good people at Pittsburgh at that time. I was very fortunate. The faculty fell apart after that year. Oh, yes, Marion Hathway too. I was really her TA. I worked closely with her teaching social policy. Wilson was a fine teacher too. I think I have been privileged to know some of those.

ISABELLE: Was there sort of a philosophical difference that you can state between those early teachers like Sophonisba Breckinridge and Abbott to the later ones?

KERMIT: In the casework area it was different because at Pittsburgh Marcus was a Rankian and so was Smalley. Rank had been a student of Freud but he was very different. He took theory in quite a different direction. That was important to me and I think that was much better teaching generally. I will first say I was lucky to have had that kind of teaching which I think was the best there was at that time. I think Pittsburgh in 1948 and '49 was as good as it ever was, probably better than it has ever been since. It had a distinguished faculty.

I was there before the period when social behavioral theory began to emerge. And I regret that, because I think social behavioral theory finally is bringing to the field a theoretical base that made psychodynamics based on Freud passe, just plain passe. Unfortunately I was too late to really be prepared in the newer theory. By the time my career was over it was too late. And that's a regret. At the same time on the positive side I am glad I had the opportunity to know the really fine minds of the times, and I would certainly put Abbott and I suppose Breckinridge, except she was in her dotage, and Smalley and Marcus as really top teachers.

BOB: Were you concerned about being able to find a job?

KERMIT: Never. No. No. When I was finishing at the University of North Dakota (I finished in mid-year by taking overloads) and I finished early, I competed for a job on the general assistance desk at Cass County Welfare Department. I was told I could have it except there was an attorney, a graduate attorney, an LLD, who had two children and he needed the job, and I didn't need one as badly. So, I said, "Heck, I can go on to school, let him have it."

When I was at the University of Minnesota, the child welfare program was just getting started in North Dakota. In my second

quarter I was offered a stipend which I took, but of course, that committed me to go back. And then when I went to Chicago I tried to avoid a stipend because I wanted to be free to look around, but when I finished by Master's I was offered a case supervisor's job in Fargo so I went back. But I never had a problem trying to get a job. They chased me to some--I don't mean to sound so arrogant, but there was such a shortage at that time. There was a shortage of even minimally trained people.

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Philosophy of social work

BOB: This is the second of November and we are doing the second interview with Kermit Wiltse.

ISABELLE: Would you talk about the philosophical sort of underpinnings of social work when you were going to college?

KERMIT: At first in college, which was at the University of North Dakota, for practical purposes there was no social work. It was sociology from an unusually liberal professor, Gillette, who had what would be termed in those times a socialist stance.

At the University of Minnesota in 1937 there was the beginnings of the strain between those who looked at the interior of the individual versus the social causes. In one sense it hasn't changed except the terms have become more sophisticated and the issues possibly somewhat more enlightened. However, students at the University of California, Berkeley or any other social work school today still can't make up their minds whether they are going to be psychotherapists or whether they are going to be people who work with social systems and social change and family systems, they are unable to resolve it themselves or to get much help from their teachers because the field itself is so bifurcated. In Chicago in the 1940's when I was there and to the end of her days Edith Abbott could not say "psychiatric." She always said "sickiatric, which was a nice way of putting it in its place.

Some professors in those days were sociologists and had a social system stance to some extent, though unsophisticated. A decade later at the University of Pittsburgh theory had taken some different forms, but the faculty was breaking apart over the struggle to decide who are the true spokesmen of field, who and what is the real social work. This struggle continues with only different words into the present. I hesitate to say it is any nearer resolution than it was then. If there is some fundamental change it is in the fact that social behavioral theory, which is relatively recent on the scene, is quite a bit better adapted, to teaching students to think in systems terms.

Finding a job in social work

BOB: When you graduated from the University of North Dakota how did you find a job?

KERMIT: A new public welfare system was being developed, one quite different from the old township system. There was a job available for \$90 a month on the general assistance desk. There were nine social workers for the whole county. There was a position open in general assistance intake for \$90 a month. I think I would have had the job if I had wanted it badly enough, but there was a graduate attorney with an LLD who had two children. They said, "He has got to have a job." And I decided, well I'll go to the University of Minnesota. So I finished mid-year, loafed a month, and went to spring quarter in Minnesota which began in March.

I went two quarters to Minnesota, for the second quarter was offered a child welfare stipend by the State of North Dakota on the condition that recipients came back to North Dakota. In August after two quarters at Minnesota I moved into a child welfare job. There was something like 20 child welfare workers scattered throughout the state, a state that had never had anything in services but was just emerging from the dark ages with an embryonic public system and new county welfare boards plus a State Board of Public Welfare, a brand new idea. In some ways it was pristine, but in another sense it was far ahead of its time, because it didn't have to clear out any rubbish and the leadership was idealistic in the best sense. Everyone in the field believed we were on the road, if not to Utopia, certainly the state was leaping forward in the development of public social services, most particularly in child welfare.

Unites States Indian Service

I received an assignment growing out of our contract with the U. S. Indian Service. I lived in the Indian Service on the old cavalry post but remained a state employee. We pioneered a program of crippled children's services. That was only one of the programs. We began periodic clinics around the state for examining kids in terms of orthopedic, plastic, and all the different physical handicaps. Every month we yearned to double the number of kids we knew about. It was in many ways a marvelous introduction to child welfare, because it was so rewarding to help kids with long neglected but repairable handicaps.

BOB: Did you travel about the state?

KERMIT: No, my assignment was to a reservation. It overlapped

two counties. My work was only with the Indians or part-Indians. Very few were full bloods anymore. It was a Sioux reservation.

BOB: How did you establish rapport with the Indians?

KERMIT: I suppose not well. We didn't know anything about them really and I found I was just terribly dumb. I didn't realize how dumb. At the Indian Service school teachers were typically old line Indian Service personnel and were generally miserable teachers. They were paternalistic to the core. To think of the Indian Service any other way, to escape the paternalistic, prejudicial attitudes seemed impossible. Perhaps it remains so.

For example, I remember a public health nurse, occupying a critically important position on the reservation, saying at lunch one day, "Well, all Indians are amoral." She was a nice old maid public health worker, probably idealistic, but she looked upon the Indians as totally immoral because they had many illegitimate children and they lived quite differently from what she believed the right way.

I only use that as an example, but the system was totally paternalistic. The Indians were treated like children and hence often responded that way. I am afraid it is partly still true today. I have always been interested in the Indian Service because of that experience, but I can't say I have followed changes closely. Perhaps little has changed. Movement off the reservations has increased whatever that means. Many Indians are seriously handicapped psychologically and sociologically, demonstrated by the extraordinary rates of suicide, alcoholism, and fierce aggression toward each other.

Case Supervisor, Cass County, North Dakota

BOB: How did you happen to leave North Dakota then?

KERMIT: After two years I went to the University of Chicago. I returned as a case supervisor in Cass County one year later. I wasn't really equipped to be a supervisor, but I was thrust into this job. Then early in 1942 I enlisted in the Army one jump ahead of the draft.

ISABELLE: What were some of the issues that you grappled with as a supervisor?

KERMIT: I suppose the simplest way of saying it is that I grappled with what it means to be a supervisor. As I said, I wasn't really equipped to do the kind of teaching that I think is essential to a supervisor. I think our education was not good enough, too confused, we didn't have a concept of social work methods. I don't think I am being over-critical. I believed I

was successful and progressed up the salary scale, but I know I was not very good. Then the war came along and I was drafted.

County welfare boards

BOB: What kind of bureaucratic requirements were put on your operation? Who did you have to report to?

KERMIT: Very low level requirements. We had a director who was kind of a chamber of commerce type, a nice guy. As a case supervisor I often met with the Welfare Board. The local board of public welfare made all the local decisions within very broad state guidelines. The relationships were very direct. I knew the state director on a personal basis and I knew every member of the local welfare board. It was a board separate from the Board of Supervisors although it had a few supervisors as members. It was independent of the Board of Supervisors and sometimes it resisted or contradicted acts of the Board of Supervisors. Those welfare boards were, in my opinion retrospectively, a very neat invention. They were a new political entity, non-paid of course, mostly idealistic and public spirited citizens who gave a lot of time to welfare work. I would report to the board each month, and members would often involve themselves with cases. It was a very direct hands on kind of administration. Welfare work quickly became too complex for that level of board involvement.

BOB: What kind of an issue would they make a policy on? Medical care?

KERMIT: Yes. I can't say they did exactly that, but I think I mentioned at one point there was still a poorhouse right at the edge of town. It was right out of the Elizabethan times.

BOB: Was it called that?

KERMIT: It was called the County Farm. But it had all the appearances, physically and in every other respect, of an old poorhouse. I am sure we were not the last county to have one. It had become a place for elderly single men and a few elderly single women. Soon old age assistance came along and that took the elderly out. The disinherited farm labor people, mostly single men no longer able to follow the crops, wound up there following accidents or illness.

The county welfare boards determined quite quickly to empty the old poorhouses and to assist people in their own homes. It became policy to close them as quickly as possible. And that is just about what happened. County welfare board policy wise was ahead of the politics of that time, which was simply to do it the cheapest way. Boards generally were from the enlightened part of the community. They supported programs like children's crippled services enthusiastically and child welfare services very well.

When AFDC came along it was readily implemented. That's what I mean by giving policy leadership.

ISABELLE: I'd like to follow-the-leader on Bob's question. Did the policy result in manuals, like the stuff we have now: Who should get it and when and under what circumstances?

KERMIT: It is interesting that you should ask me that question, because I still report with some slight embarrassment when the State Board told us we would have to use a standard budget in calculating assistance payments. There were no standard budgets in 1939. We could write as much or a little as we felt like within very vague guidelines, with neither top or bottom limits. I recall I resisted standard budgeting at first. Perhaps it came back to poor teaching at Chicago. I did not have teaching about the necessity of a standard budget as the key to equitable treatment. Total subjectivity was the hallmark of social case work. Clients were treated subjectively and inequitably.

As a case supervisor I wasn't bright enough or educated enough to know to immediately force consistent treatment of clients by my caseworkers. We were sort of a bunch of entrepreneurs operating a welfare system. That's extreme perhaps, but we had no manuals. The movement of the state toward manuals was a clear step forward. They were trying to encourage the counties to work on them. As there is now in slightly different contexts, there was this struggle between state and county, and the counties were determined to run the show, and they did to a considerable extent.

World War II Experiences

BOB: How did you feel about going into the army?

KERMIT: Badly. I didn't want the army at all, but I had no choice on that. I happened to have a fairly low number, you know. The numbers became a terrific game. I hadn't made all the right moves, perhaps, but anyway I was drafted fairly quickly and went into the army like everybody else did, just one of the thousands who were drafted.

I had no protection at all. I wasn't in a vital industry. I wasn't a farm boy. If I had stayed on the farm I could have got out of it if I had wanted to, because all the farm boys were exempted if they were really into farming. But, that was the only industry in the state that was exempted in a blanket way.

I cared not at all for the army. I suppose I despised it most of all because it's an autocracy run by generals and I just don't cotton to that kind of nonsense and I think much of it was not necessary. The kind of denigration of the individuals which the old army officers, who of course became the cadres for the new

army until new men were moved up, had been essentially conditioned and trained into a stance of denigrating the men. It was the way you made them disciplined, you know. Wipe them out psychologically. Denigrate them. Make them feel that they didn't have any sense. In a real sense brutalize them. As the proportion of draftees increased, it became in fact a new army with a different ethos. In combat an officer who tried to hassle his men didn't live very long.

ISABELLE: How long did you stay in the army?

KERMIT: As long as I had to. We were being deployed for the Eastern theater from Europe when we dropped the bomb on Japan. I actually was in a deployment depot for coming back to the States for furlough perhaps and then be redeployed to the far East. But I might not have been anyway, because I was on the edge of being too old for combat duty. I was one of the older men in the infantry division, but that was what it was about. It was wonderful that all of a sudden the war was over! One day I was expected to be redeployed and the next day it was over and we were on the way home.

BOB: How did this experience change your perspective when you came back into civilian life?

KERMIT: I can't say it changed it very much. I didn't do any terribly useful work in the army. I was in personnel and a lot of it was terribly routine. Incidentally, the classification for social worker (I had a Master's Degree.) was finally developed in 1944 and published in July 1944. I had been watching for it and because I was in classification work for army personnel I saw it immediately. I applied immediately for it and the application went up the chain and came back down the chain (you know how the army works.) and that darn letter came back with 27 endorsements. I still remember. I counted them. Each level endorsed it on because the lower echelons didn't know what to do with it. Here was a new classification and it said something about very badly needed for disciplinary barracks and all kinds of things. It went forward clear up to Washington and came back down one step at a time. It was the funniest thing you ever saw. In essence, by that time our division was alerted for overseas duty and nobody could be moved out. So we went over seas.

If I had to be in the army and if I had to be in the war, I guess I was kind of glad I went overseas. I lived through it, and as you said, it was an experience. I was only overseas ten months.
##

Beginning a Career in Teaching

BOB: What did you get into when you got back into civilian life?

KERMIT: I didn't know what I was going to get into. I just was anxious to get out of the army and I got out pretty fast once they started redeployment began. As soon as I came back to my home town in North Dakota I received a phone call from an old professor, not Gillette but another one at the University. He said, "We are into the semester two weeks already. We've got a flood of GI's. We don't have enough teachers. Will you come here and teach sociology?" I said, "You are two weeks late into the year and I have never done any teaching." He said, "Well, come anyway." So I thought, "Oh, what the heck, I'll give it a whirl," and I stayed in it. It was, in that sense, somewhat fortuitous that I landed in teaching.

BOB: What was your feeling when you faced your first class?

KERMIT: I can't remember. I must have been reasonably brash because I took on teaching sociology with nothing but a B.A. major in it. I taught mostly introductory sociology and learned it week by week. I must have done fairly well because I certainly got along all right. We worked very hard because we taught not only sociology and some other things, but started what were called social work courses also. I taught a course in casework and a course in social security. At one time I even taught a course in cultural anthropology even though I had had only courses in physical anthropology.

ISABELLE: Do you remember any encounter with a student?

KERMIT: Not really. We had lots of good students. By and large, North Dakota's students were always less assertive in comparison to California students. Even today I believe they are less assertive. I must have been a fairly good teacher. I probably shocked them a certain amount and kept them interested. I had enough of a flair on socialistic and irreligious ideas to keep them off balance. I wasn't a devout Lutheran like most of them were, so I could be free in talking about things like physical anthropology, evolution, and so social reform. I don't know whether they liked it or not, but they didn't bring enough to their folks so that I was thrown out. All I can say is that teaching seemed to suit me and I seemed to suit the University well enough. I did work very hard.

ISABELLE: What was it about teaching, then, that began to attract you?

KERMIT: Ideas. I remember I always was excited by a new concept, whether sociology, anthropology, or most anything. Ideas opened up a door and I wanted to try to communicate ideas successfully. I was always excited or intrigued by a conceptual opening of some kind. Once I got into teaching sociology, I had to learn it awfully quickly and reasonably. Rather than being non-plussed by these demands, I liked them.

Political values and social change

BOB: Did you identify yourself as a socialist in those days?

KERMIT: No, not at all. I could identify myself as a liberal. In comparison to my family I was thought a radical, but that is ridiculous. I never was a radical. I was always liberal in the general political sense, but I had a naive faith in the possibility of political and social change. I have always been relatively idealistic about it. I believed conditions could be changed and were being changed in North Dakota.

Actually, North Dakota is one of the exceptional states in the union in terms of some kinds of progressive ideas, even though voting patterns were strongly conservative on national issues. It is the only state in the union that has a state bank, a state elevator, a state mill, and the only state in the union that I know of that prohibits absentee landlordism. Metropolitan Life, for example, had to sell its land holdings. There is a flavor of socialism perhaps like Norway, for example. Absentee landlordism is prohibited, I believe, in the Scandinavian countries. It's an interesting concept.

ISABELLE: Did you become politically active during this time?

KERMIT: I have never been politically active. I was always interested conceptually, but I had no political flair, or wish to be. A politician always has to move toward the power. He always has to gravitate toward powerful people over others. He always has to be conscious of where it gets him. I just didn't want to be or couldn't be. I probably couldn't be, just inherently couldn't be. In fact the powerless and the vulnerable attracted me more. You can't identify with the powerless and progress in politics.

Marriage and family

BOB: Did you have a family by then?

KERMIT: I was married shortly after I went in the army. It affected my army career in that I chose not to go to OCS. I decided to avoid any choices that might take me overseas. I didn't go overseas until December of 1944, and the European war was already winding down. The young people who were ambitious in the army, those who entered basic training with me, went on to OCS as quickly as possible. Those who wound up in the infantry likely went overseas quickly and many were killed. I had no wish to risk that outcome.

ISABELLE: Did you have a family when you were teaching in North Dakota?

KERMIT: Jane became pregnant almost immediately. We had a baby [Stephen] in December of 1942, which was right in the middle of the war, so when I came back to North Dakota I had one child. Going overseas meant losing out on my oldest child's infant years.

ISABELLE: How long did you stay in teaching at North Dakota?

KERMIT: Three years. I was thinking about going on to a doctoral program when in the summer of 1948 the old dean of the College of Letters and Science, his name was Bek, who had really sponsored me almost from the beginning of my career in the University as a freshman died suddenly. Also the professor who had first asked me to try teaching died that summer. It seemed a good time to leave and at the last minute I was able to get into Pittsburgh. If they had not both died I probably wouldn't have left for at least another year.

DSW at the University of Pittsburgh

ISABELLE: This is for your PhD?

KERMIT: Yes, except Pittsburgh was the first school to develop the DSW. As it turned out I became the third DSW in the country, the third to receive the DSW. Merrill Conover was first and Ruth Smalley was second. Ruth Smalley was a teacher at the University of Pittsburgh, but she was also in the doctorate program. The doctoral program was made up of two parts: one part started at Menninger Clinic, then came for the second part at Pitt. Then those who were all the time at Pitt. I was at Pitt all the time. It was not nearly as immersed in psychiatric theory as those who went through Menniger's.

ISABELLE: What was the highlight of your experience in getting the DSW?

KERMIT: There were so many. We really had a good time. I was there only two years. I made terrific progress, almost unbelievable, but I worked hard. I did some field work in group work, in casework and in community organization. I also did some teaching in two different courses. And I wrote a dissertation. The dissertation was not emphasized at Pitt, but I stayed an extra summer to complete it.

I enjoyed Pittsburgh as an experience. I had never lived in that kind of urban environment. It was physically a very interesting city. We were there the year of the infamous Denora smog. Do you remember that? I think that over 100 people died just from smog. Pittsburgh was so dirty. So that part was a negative, but retrospectively it was kind of like an adventure even if a dirty one.

I remember after one serious smog storm, you might call it, our two kids played fox and geese in the ashes in the park. You know, the game of fox and geese like you play in the snow, the fallout was so thick. Pittsburgh cleaned itself up and it is, I guess, one of the cleanest towns in the country now.

The steel mills were wonderful. We could see them out our front window. Watching the Bessemer converters was like attending an event. Also going out to the slag dumps to watch the loads being dumped from railroad cars was quite a thrill. At night, it was a continuous firefall.

At the school we were a small group of six or seven doctoral students. We became close and were close to the faculty. It was an intimate teaching and learning experience. I think that the women there were outstandingly good teachers.

ISABELLE: Do you have any story standing out in your memory about any of the ladies?

KERMIT: Well, Ruth Smalley and Grace Marcus, of course, were what you would call the vanguard of the functional school. They were Rankians (Rank was a deviant from Freud) and an improvement over Freud. I lapped it up, but I partly lapped it up because they were good teachers, thoughtful and challenging.

Those were two good years for me intellectually, no so good for Jane and the kids. We lived in a place that had been Pittsburgh's worst slum. But, even the experience of the slum was kind of interesting after North Dakota. Fargo had no slums really.

One experience that stands out was being close to a faculty in crisis. Dean Newstetter and a couple of others were at war with Smalley and predictably with Marcus and Wilson--those two in particular. The Dean had actually fired Marcus. I gravitated toward the functionalists, particularly Marcus, but I knew I had to keep on the good side of the others as my dissertation committee contained people from both camps. I was fearful as orals approached that I was going to be the bone at a dogfight. Each camp tested my loyalty. I tried to keep out of the struggle. Somehow I passed. I let them argue with each other during my orals.

ISABELLE: What was your dissertation on?

KERMIT: It was actually a study of case recording in public assistance. I did some field studies in Pennsylvania, a state directed program. It was no earth-shaking dissertation. We just said, "Let's get one done and get it done quickly." Jane typed it and we were extremely efficient.

ISABELLE: Do you have any gems to pass on about case recording, which still plagues us?

KERMIT: Yes. There are no gems, of course. Recording is related to what is the purpose of the agency. In those days in public assistance we were doing really quite a bit of casework. It was long before the days when the public assistance became just passing out a check, you know, or verifying eligibility. Public assistance was the basic social services program of those times. Child welfare and some other things were starting to be added on, but public assistance, particularly AFDC, ADC it was called, was the basic social service family program. You moved from that into all kinds of social services, casework, if you will, rehabilitation, helping families with their medical and physical and psychological and all kinds of problems to try to get them--not so much to get them off assistance, but to help them manage their lives and possibly for many of them to rehabilitate themselves. It was a social service program.

It wasn't really until much later that we gave up on that and realized that the eligibility determination was, to put it simply, a clerical job. Something was lost from public welfare when we moved away from any real effort to use public assistance as casework. We were always under the challenge of using relief as the tool (and there was actually an article on that) The accusation was misleading. We never used relief simply as a tool, but social workers were accused of wanting to hold out their public assistance as a way of making it possible for them to manipulate a family in the way they thought it ought to be. That was the most negative view you could put on it.

To come back to your question, I suppose that one of the highlights was the opportunity to work very closely with Marion Hathway, who was a fine teacher of social welfare organization. She had been under investigation as a communist. She wasn't one at all, but was considered very liberal. I think she was hauled up later on before the McCarthy committee. And working with Marcus and Smalley, particularly Marcus, who had a brilliant mind was exciting. I did a tutorial with her and it was rough going. I still remember how I was scared of her, because she didn't let you get by with a fuzzy thought.

University of California, Berkeley

BOB: How did you come to leave, what did you do?

KERMIT: As soon as I was through I was looking for a job. Jobs were not scarce, they came seeking me. Incidentally, it has always been my experience. I have always had a job seeking me. With a nice shiny doctorate on the horizon I was in extreme demand. I could have gone to practically anyplace. Wisconsin

for one. I went up to Madison, and almost chose Wisconsin. I finally went to the schools conference, CSWE it was called, Council on Social Work education. In that spring I was graduating and I took time off and went up there just to look for a job or just look around. It was like a slave market--it was called that. The deans were there to try to hire people. They were seeking you.

I happened to bump into Hazel Fredericksen who had been a field rep for the children's bureau way back when I was in North Dakota and we knew each other from then. She said, "Well, I'm retiring. Why don't you come and take my job?" I said, "Well, I haven't even thought of California." "There is Dean Chernin right over there. I'll introduce you to him and you can come there and take my job." Of course that isn't the way things worked at Cal. She introduced me and Dean Chernin very tactfully demurred but said, "You can apply." Well I did, but really the job found me. If I hadn't bumped into Hazel I probably would have gone to Wisconsin.

BOB: Lots of things hinge on circumstances.

ISABELLE: That was what? 1950--

School of Social Work

KERMIT: 1950. So, I finished my dissertation and loaded up my junk, what I could, in an old trailer and came to California. California in the '50's--Chernin remarked this: the '50's were, he always thought, the golden age of the School of Social Work at Cal. That's his nostalgia, but to a certain extent that was true.

After the war suddenly we were popular. We had a good student body. We had new faculty coming on and some very good people like Ernest Greenwood and Henry Maas and Gordon Hearn and Gertrude Wilson eventually. Who else were some of the young ones anyway? It was good optimistic times. We didn't have profound philosophical or intellectual disagreements. What we had we enjoyed. Martin Wolins was a student in 1950 and he was one of my first students. I kind of cut my teeth on Martin Wolins here at Cal. You know, he challenged everybody including even his wife. He eventually came onto the faculty. Anyway, the '50's was a very good decade. We didn't start getting into the difficult times until '65.

ISABELLE: What were some of the courses that you taught?

KERMIT: I have always taught casework, practically every year for 30 years. I taught first year casework and fairly early on I took over the responsibility for the child welfare area. That meant finding or arranging field placements, and working with half a dozen different supervisors who were in the child welfare

field. To some extent there was some fortuitousness in it in that Hazel was retiring, but I was on the ground and it seemed to me that somebody needed to lead that area. The school was split up into child welfare, psychiatric, medical, and so forth. Ruth Cooper was in medical, Pearl Axelrod in psychiatric, I was child welfare. Psychiatric dominated in terms of numbers, partly because it had so much money from NIMH, but we had a lot of child welfare money in those days too. Everybody could get a stipend if they had anything on the ball.

Child welfare issues

ISABELLE: What were sort of the main problems in child welfare then?

KERMIT: I should have done some more thinking about this. The shortages were just as intense as they are today, but they were, in some ways, less. To put it another way around, we were more optimistic in that we believed all we needed was more personnel, which would come in time. The schools were not turning out enough, but as rapidly as we could we were staffing the agencies with trained, quote, unquote, child welfare workers.

I recall in the '50's my typical graduate student had many choices. I remember one who bragged about it. He had 18 different offers. Most students were on stipends so were locked into working in a state child welfare program, but not to any particular county, so they could look around and pick the county anywhere they wanted to work. The constant theme was not enough trained personnel. It was only gradually that we realized that training was not all there was to it by any means, and that the system really didn't utilize trained people particularly well and people weren't well trained either, and it became a vicious circle.

Child welfare was pretty much related specifically to foster care, protective services and adoption, and students would maybe say, "I had field work in adoption and I want to work in an adoption program agency." Those aspects were growing in different ways in different counties around the states, so most students could crochet their own assignment pretty well, or negotiate their own assignment. I'm talking about the '50's and part of the '60's. Only gradually did we realize that this conception that all we needed was more people was inadequate. The field needed leadership, agencies needed better supervision, and we needed system changes. Most of all we needed better casework theory. The training that our people were getting was not good enough, but we could offer no better. We needed a public that supported the concept of child welfare irrespective of whether speaking of trained people or otherwise.

The counties rapidly set up standards and most of them were primed to demand trained people, so there was just an insatiable demand for trained social workers and the schools would just grind them out as fast as they could. And they all got jobs and they all had choices. They didn't get great salaries, but the salaries were edging up. I think it could be generally said that it was an optimistic time in the '50's particularly and part of the '60's, and there was generally good leadership in the State department. Many counties were had pretty good programs going, like Contra Costa in particular.

AFDC incapacitated fathers project

ISABELLE: Was it at that time you wrote that article? You did some research on the AFDC families. Could you tell us about it?

KERMIT: Well, I actually wrote a pamphlet on the AFDC fathers, the incapacitated fathers. That was one of the first ones. I just took on a caseload out in Contra Costa of incapacitated fathers who headed AFDC families. Incapacitated fathers were being treated as if they were already dead, and they were functioning in an ambiguous role as heads of families and not as heads of the family.

The check could not be written in the father's name. The check had to be in the wife's name and the father, though present anonymous. Social worker rarely talked with fathers. The questions are obvious. Are they going to be a father or aren't they? Are they to be treated as having a role in this family? We had little realization of what we were doing to families. Up until then I hadn't really appreciated the crucial fact that a family is a social system, an interaction of roles and it is only going to function effectively as a family if it gets treated from the outside as a going concern. You could read a file and you wouldn't even be sure if there was a father still alive. The systems conception was more important than the casework relationship. I felt I began to learn casework on that project, but still lacked a solid theory.

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Developing a commitment to academia

BOB: This is November 16, 1989. When you joined the academic staff at Cal did you find that you had a commitment to the academic regimen?

KERMIT: Well, perhaps beginning to. As you remember, I pointed out that it was quite by accident I first entered academia, and that my commitment was very much to practice initially with no expectation of moving into academia. After the war when personnel was needed at the University of North Dakota, and I was

asked to fill in at teaching I found that I liked it. My commitment to academia developed gradually.

It was somewhat fortuitous that I went on for a doctorate. As I told you, my dean and my department head both died the summer of 1948 and it just seemed like a good time to make a move. I went to Pittsburgh for a doctorate and after putting all that time and effort into academia commitment followed as an accretion. It is not usually true, though some people say they are committed to being something or other from the time they are children. I have always questioned such certainties. My own involvement was gradual. After teaching at Pittsburgh and having the opportunity to work with intellectually oriented people like Marion Hathway and Grace Marcus, my models were firmly established.

In taking the job at Cal Berkeley I had only the vaguest appreciation of what I was stepping into. Cal is a university, as you probably know, that is unequivocal about the fact that faculty must publish or perish. Cal was then the most unequivocal of all the social work schools on that point. I thought it would be an easy requirement to meet; it proved to be very difficult. I represented social work practice at the school, as committed to the field as to academia. My commitment to academia was not as unequivocal as people who entered PhD programs immediately with academia their sole objective, whether a scholar in social work or another field.

At that time social workers who were committed to academia were looked on with some suspicion by the field. They were judged to be those people who couldn't be any good in practice, were unsuited for it by personality. Academics were only those who could spout theory and write dry articles. They weren't really social workers.

So there was that ambivalence in the way academics were looked at by practitioners as well as a kind of ambivalence on my own part in that I was not a dyed-in-the-wool, pure form academic. In other departments at Cal most faculty members have always been theoreticians and their intellectual life is devoted to academia. I was always equally committed to practice, to working in the field, in other words, to professional practice. I believe any professional in a highly academic university like Cal Berkeley, whether doctors, nurses, home economists, social workers, or even engineers often feel in an ambiguous position. Engineers, for example, want to practice, want to build bridges or design electronics rather than teach about them. A perfect blend is not easily achieved. My commitment came gradually, eventually I realized I really not only liked teaching but I liked theory for its own sake. Then the fact that the field had little theory compounded my personal problem.

ISABELLE: How did the academia and the field, this relationship, evolve for you? You had one foot in each field, as it were.

KERMIT: Not an easy difficult question to answer. Perhaps I could say it never did evolve fully. As soon as I got out of academia it is noteworthy that I quit being an academic.

I was talking to one of my friends yesterday who retired this year and I said, "What are you doing since you retired?" He said, "Well, I am just like on one long sabbatical. I've got ten years of writing and a book to finish." I said to him, "I almost deliberately went away from academia, cancelled all my academic type publications and don't go to the library." And so, I suppose I didn't have the kind of commitment he does. In other words, his life doesn't change at all, except that as he said he is on full time sabbatical. I guess I never had his total commitment. I was always partly committed to the practice. Incidentally, he has told me he envied me to some extent. He looked to me as his mentor viz a viz the field. I always enjoyed that role with reference to the academic types around the school. There is a bit of a strain always between academics and the non-academic types, but I was in that fortunate, not always comfortable position of having a foot in both fields, both areas, both sides, and was looked to as a bridge between two somewhat antagonistic camps.

Field projects

BOB: How did you stay grounded with practitioners in the field?

KERMIT: As a field consultant I always carried a caseload of fieldwork supervisors. That itself was unusual for someone carrying a full load of course teaching. I was, I think, the only one who carried a full load of both. I paid a price for it in that consultation is time consuming. Although it kept me very closely in touch with the field, I had less time for research and writing.

Nearly every summer in my early years at Cal I did a project in the field, in Contra Costa County or in San Mateo or in Santa Clara. I think I had two or three projects in Alameda, half a dozen on the San Francisco side. Instead of considering summer the time to sit down and write articles or books, I was usually doing a project. Sometimes the project produced writing, but it was by a more torturous route than if one just goes to the library and writes all summer. So, production was always a problem to me. I didn't have the single minded devotion to writing that is the fastest way to get ahead at Cal.

BOB: What was the most memorable of these projects?

KERMIT: No doubt the first one in Contra Costa County. I started that on the day our youngest child was born. He was born at five o'clock and I was out there in Richmond working on this project at nine. It was the most memorable not only because it was the first but also in that it received the most attention and for very little substance. I don't think it was the most significant. Much later the work in foster care led to some deserved recognition.

The trouble with the public assistance projects, of which there were several, were that I failed to recognize the inevitable. Public assistance was losing out as anything of a recognized social work arena. It was becoming an income maintenance arena. I gave up on AFDC very gradually and reluctantly, and I still believe that conceptually it could be an important social work field. It is not one anymore, but it was hard for me to accept that. In my doctor program at Pitt I worked on public assistance. I had done a project in public assistance as a dissertation project and I had an early and profound interest there.

ISABELLE: Could you tell us a little about the Contra Costa project? What year was that?

KERMIT: 1951. Not much to tell. I won my spurs as a caseworker by taking on those difficult cases. In retrospect it wasn't as difficult as it looked, but at the time there was not much in the way of a conceptual model or theory to work with in social casework. It was seat-of-the pants stuff like we got from Charlotte Towle to say to yourself you have knowledge and skills that can make a difference in individual or family behavior. The project was very rewarding and I felt more competent as a caseworker from that time on. I was doing casework, not therapy. I wasn't treating the psyches of these people. I was trying to help people, incapacitated fathers in this instance to assert their existence within their family systems. I was saying, "You still exist." You are still a human being and a father, and can retain your position as head of a family, or at least instrumental in a family. You can mean something to your kids besides that guy who sits over in the corner and mopes. Conceptually the project blended social policy with systems theory. To me that is casework, to work with a family system and make it functional.

ISABELLE: How many were in a caseload?

KERMIT: I think I had worked on 27 that summer, but I was only there three short months totally.

BOB: Were you connected with the Social Service Department?

KERMIT: Yes. Veryl Lewis was my supervisor. Remember Veryl? We became good friends. I was part of her unit. Funding, a grand total of \$1,200, came from the State Department of Social Welfare. Perhaps my doing the project indicated I wasn't yet fully committed to academia. Instead of writing something for publication my aim was to earn a little extra money. We came out of Pittsburgh broke and in debt. More importantly it meant doing something close to my heart in terms of practice, but with important academic implications in terms of teaching social casework. In terms of making an intellectual impact on other than the social work field, it didn't impress academics at all. They didn't understand it. They couldn't understand why anybody would devote a summer to working with those slobs. The academic types at Cal, and I don't mean just the School of Social Work, the social scientists didn't see its relevance.

ISABELLE: That was not the only summer then that you--

KERMIT: Oh no.

ISABELLE: Was there another memorable project that you would like to--

KERMIT: Not that stands out in the same way. I suppose the summer in San Mateo when I worked with children was very good, but it didn't add up to anything publishable, hence no splash. As regards the Contra Costa project, I had just come to California so it started me off on an awfully good footing. Eventually I won the Koshland award, which meant recognition beyond my wildest dreams. A fair amount of speech making and incidental teaching flowed from the Contra Costa project. In the long run I don't think it was as important as the studies in foster care, which came much later. things which started in the '70's.

Foster care studies

BOB: Can you tell us more about that?

KERMIT: The foster care studies in the early '70's. I had a sabbatical coming up and I was thinking about a way that would get me back into child welfare. I had been associate dean and an acting dean for three or four years after '65. I had been so busy with administration I had lost my intimate association with the field.

I went to the San Francisco Department of Social Services with my request to study foster care, not fully appreciating what I was getting into. I fairly quickly realized that foster care had many, many problems. Some basic change in purpose and implementation were necessary. At this same time, which I became aware of later, that which was called the Oregon project was getting underway. Also the Children's Defense Fund nationally,

and citizen's committees in this state were becoming concerned about the fact that children were piling up in foster care. They were neither moving towards adoption or return home. They weren't doing anything. There was a great need for rethinking and for reform.

BOB: How did your work with foster care impact on legislation? What was the process?

KERMIT: I was afraid you would ask that. I don't exactly know how. There was such a ferment of studies and experimental projects drawing upon and stimulating each other. George Miller's administrative assistant was very much in touch with me. We talked many times when he was here or I in Washington. But he was talking to a lot of other people too, and we were all reading the same things, the Children's Defense Fund report and the reports from California and other states. Each report coming out was very critical of foster care as structured. All this ferment came together in the '70's and would eventuate in major reform.

Here in California the activities of Mike Wald and Minuchin eventuated in SB-14, it was called, and at the national level in George Miller's bill, the 1980 bill, Adoption and Child Welfare reform. How does one know what ideas he uses and where they arose amid so much ferment. My colleagues and I wrote four articles for the magazine Public Welfare that were reprinted and widely dispersed. Who read what and what they did with it is hard for me to say, "Well, I had a lot to do with that." I knew Mike Wald and Robert Minuchin quite well. We talked frequently and participated in institutes together. Wald and Minuchin were the principle authors, but SB-14 was developed by a number of people. I cannot pinpoint my own contribution. I certainly was not along. With reference to publication, Ted Stein and Eileen Gambrill were my collaborators.

ISABELLE: Besides the issue of children in foster care, of children being stuck in foster homes and not moving on, what other problems in foster care were there at that time?

KERMIT: Conceptually, I think, foster care had never got much beyond the early 1900's. To put it in categorical terms, the most influential book, I think, in the field was "Foster Care of Children: Nurture and Treatment" by Kline and Overstreet.¹ Foster care was viewed by them as treatment, which is conceptually misleading. Foster care thought of as an opportunity to have kids available for treatment, and presumably parents available for clinical treatment, was the prevailing

¹Draza Klein and Helen Overstreet, Foster Care of Children: Nurture and Treatment (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972)

theory. This approach is simply wrong and misleading in application.

Foster care should be a temporary way of dealing with children until you sort out some things. You are not doing clinical treatment. Clinical treatment is something else. I don't say this as well as I could, if I too more time to think about it, I have written about it a good deal.

Foster care was being administered as if its purpose was to provide children and parents to social workers for clinical treatment. In San Francisco as an example, the social caseworkers with Master's Degrees were even doing play therapy with kids in foster care if they had the time and the inclination. Case plans were rarely addressed to answer the essential questions: Is this kid going to stay in care? How long? Is he going back home? If so, what is the plan that will make his home safe? Is he going to move toward adoption? When I started asking them, "What is your plan for this kid? What do you expect? Where is he going be five years from now?" They would look at me cross-eyed, you know, who-cares? sort of look. Returning them home, or moving toward adoption or doing something other than just let them sit there was more or less incidental.

When I started reviewing caseloads with them and saying, "Now what's the plan for this kid?", I don't think I am making it over dramatic, they had none. It was almost an impertinent question. Like, "Why, what's this about plans?" I don't think I am an extremist on this, but, you see, SB-14 is about plans, about case plans, about case management, about changing the system, about having goals for each kid on the assumption that foster care, itself, is not treatment.

Foster care is inevitably limbo for a kid. Foster care had a permanent arrangement by indirection. When I started using the word with San Francisco people, "Do you mean permanent foster care?" they were ambiguous about that. So I said, "Either you mean permanent or you don't. If a child has been in a home five years and you are making no effort to do anything different with him, no expectations, no plan, no nothing, then you have in fact concluded that he is going to grow up in foster care." "Oh, no, no. We haven't concluded that." "Well then, why aren't you doing something different? What are you doing to make things different?"

I sound like I made myself very obnoxious, and unintentionally, I did. When I summarized at the end of the first summer and handed it to the supervisor of adoption, her response was non-committal, "Publish it if you like. Whatever." Apparently it didn't waken any alarm in her. Eventually articles appeared in Public Welfare describing the issues in foster care with San Francisco's program the example. Some of the caseworkers responded with everlasting

antipathy toward Wiltse because of what was said in those articles. I certainly intended the criticism to be directed to the system, not to the caseworkers.

BOB: You are leveling your criticism at adoption--

KERMIT: At the foster care system.

BOB: And at residential institutional care?

KERMIT: Residential institutional care was over-used in San Francisco for a number of systemic as well as pragmatic reasons, but it was not any worse as a non-solution than permanent foster care without case plans.

I haven't been around it for a long time, but I suspect it is still the case in Alameda County. Permanent foster care is the outcome oftentimes without any clear unequivocal recognition it has been concluded the child is unadoptable. Even though he is free for adoption, he will not be moved in that direction. With or without an articulated policy, permanent foster care has become the case plan. For example, in Contra Costa the adoption department tends to regard any child past eight as unadoptable.

We have unused capacity at Aask² for kids of 10, 11, 12 and 13. We have parents waiting for both black and white kids. And we can't get them out of the counties as rapidly as homes could be found. Contra Costa is one of the offenders. And you can communicate that to them if you want to. I just don't give a damn. I am going to try to precipitate a meeting in which we make clear to the new director that Contra Costa's adoption program is slow to refer older children for adoption, or not doing it at all. It does not make sense that older kids stay in care when there are adoptive homes available. Success with pre-adolescent kids is just as good as with any other age. It is just nonsense that they are unadoptable and dreadful for kids.

BOB: The adoption process takes a long time. Would you shorten that process up?

KERMIT: I don't know what you mean by a long time, but I know that to do an adoption carefully so you are reasonably sure that you have a family that is committed to these kids and this adoption, it has to be a fair span of time between the time the family says, "Yes, I will take this kid," and the time that they apply for finalization. And that's most especially true when you are dealing with the kids six, seven, eight, nine, ten years old,

²Aask Northern California is part of Aask America, an agency that has pioneered in finding adoptive homes for special needs children.

and kids that are physically handicapped and sometimes mentally handicapped.

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Changes in social work education

BOB: In the span of your career what have been the changes in social work education?

KERMIT: I am trying to think of the most profound changes. I suppose that there has been an important, and to some extent successful, effort to shift to evidence oriented practice, practice grounded on theory and measurement built in to prove, to show that it either does or does not work. The rapid development of social behavioral theory, which lends itself to measurement of results, accounts for most of this change. The greater use of research by practitioners is a consequence of these developments.

There certainly has been a burgeoning in the field of much more sophisticated publication. Articles in Social Work are more evidence oriented, you might say research oriented, and in that sense, more sophisticated than they were 20 years ago. There has been, I think, an important shift toward looking at social systems, that is, seeing individuals, families, and groups as parts of systems. It means a shift to systems rather than individuals as the focus of treatment.

Among the schools of social work faculty with advanced education has become standard. In 1945 Hazeltime Taylor was made acting dean of the School of Social Welfare, University of California, Berkeley because she was the only person that had a doctorate. The Cal Berkeley campus could not allow anyone to be a dean who didn't hold a doctorate. Now there probably isn't a person around there that doesn't either have a doctorate or is on the way to receiving one. The theoretical and intellectual grounding of an academic orientation is that the faculty must have advanced degrees.

Cal, Berkeley, as you know, was always--even 40 years ago Cal, Berkeley would be represented by items on the list of publications available in the field at a rate much higher than any other school. At that time Berkeley was ahead of any of them; Columbia, Chicago, or Michigan. Publication has increasingly become more balanced. The big schools like Columbia and Michigan have become great producers of publications also. Publication is one measure of maturity in a professional field.

Teachers are younger because they are people who have gone through graduate school including a PhD program with little or no intervening practice experience. Faculties are increasingly made up of younger, academically oriented people with doctorates. When I came to Berkeley, the faculty was mostly mid-aged or older

people who had been in the field a long time and were greatly respected practitioners.

ISABELLE: Do you see any change in the kind of students that came in as you taught?

KERMIT: Oh, I think it is quite marked. They are more literate, they are better educated. Of course, Cal, Berkeley can be even more choosy than it was 20 years ago. When I last did admissions we were taking one out of ten white women who applied, all with high grade point averages. We could be very choosy. Our students were highly academic and they tended to be high performers also. I think the total quality of students is reflected in the quality of the papers they write. The emeriti give a \$200 prize each year for a term paper judged the best among those submitted. We get 20 or 30 papers to judge and some of them are simply outstanding, perhaps publishable. We are speaking of first year students.

ISABELLE: What are the basic things that you hope a student learns from the two years?

KERMIT: I wish they would learn values. We found that we never could teach values, at least could not be sure we succeeded. We had a little better success teaching enthusiasm and commitment. Unless students come with the right values, there is little evidence we succeed in correcting the deficiencies.

I thought I usually communicated a respect for conceptual and logical analysis. Of course much of teaching is communicating information. Students have to absorb a lot of information which is the building blocks of analysis. Systems theory, for example, is composed of several very intellectually abstract concepts. A respect for theory and for theory building we succeeded in transmitting sometimes. I think we did pretty well on social policy concepts. Students wrote good papers on it. Courses in research are always down graded by most students, they just have to plod through them.

There has been another development, as you know, that cross cuts this academic effort, and that is that private practice has become such an attractive career idea. We have students who come to Cal, Berkeley, and all they really want is to be immersed in psychiatric theory. This is a harsh judgement, but I just think they ought to go somewhere else. This school doesn't specialize in psychotherapeutic practice. But, they can find enough around to ladle it up like a cat does cream, and they leave committed to private practice. Public social services are of no interest. Theory, social policy, and research are just a bore to such students. Getting a license to hang on the wall as a ticket to make as much money as possible is their real objective.

As you may remember, for quite a while there was an ongoing argument: Was private practice social work? Well, I don't want to beat that dead horse, but it never seemed to me like practice was in the center of social work. I can understand student's disenchantment with the public welfare field because of the excessive demands made upon staff. Obtaining a license in the quickest way possible is a rational choice. It is not a commitment I enjoy seeing students make, but it is what happens very often.

Publish or perish

BOB: I want to pick up on a loose end. You had some anxiety about publishing. How did you solve that? How did you manage to get over that hurdle?

KERMIT: Just by doing it. I had to write a report for my summer's work the first summer in Berkeley, and I did it and it went over well. Retrospectively, it was not well written. My wife commented the other day that, "You write much better than you did when you first started." I agreed I do. It is mostly the result of practice. It is like playing the violin. You practice and practice. To some people I believe writing comes much easier than to others. I had to work at it. I was not (disregard the fact that I talk too much now) reared in a verbal family like (well, I used extremes) some (I don't mean to stereotype) a Jewish family like Maas'. You remember him?

ISABELLE Yes.

KERMIT: Well, one time we were picking cherries at Hazeltine Taylor's. We, Jane and I and our two kids, were in one set of trees and the Maases and their kids were in some others. Henry remarked, "You know, there is such a difference. We talk all the time." We were up there maybe an hour and we had hardly said a word to each other. Well, constant articulation is practice. I think the same, to an extent, is true of writing. He was a very good writer and also very verbal. His wife and the children also. Constant practice makes a difference.

I disadvantaged my kids, I suppose. Yet Steve, our eldest, writes for a newspaper now. To my amazement he writes well. When he was in high school he was pretty bad and our second son even worse. Writing was not their dish then. But as they got older and got into it, Steve is a fine writer and Paul is a good writer, and now writes reports all the time now for a living. Practice counts. Steve says, "I enjoy it, even though I get paid miserably for it, I enjoy doing it." He is an art critic for a newspaper in Santa Cruz.

ISABELLE: I would like to ask one more question about social

work education. If you had to change or add something to the social work curriculum, what would it be? Or delete.

KERMIT: That's kind of a hard one. You want to just say, "Well, do what you are doing, but do it better." I suppose I would have earlier on, as I have already implied, made a conspicuous shift in the theoretical base of the human behavior course sequences, and I think an important shift in the social environment sequence. Social systems theory would come in much earlier. We got into it very gradually in about the 1960's. By the time I retired, I was just barely getting a grip on systems theory. And the same would have been true of social behavioral theory. I was just beginning to get a little bit into it, but could never claim to own it. This is only to say that it should have happened earlier, but I think had I had carte blanc I would probably have introduced these theories much earlier. Much earlier, like ten to twenty years earlier. Is that an answer?

Associate Dean of the School of Social Welfare

BOB: One last question on academia. When you became the dean, or assistant dean--

KERMIT: Acting dean and associate dean.

BOB: What kind of problems did you face there?

KERMIT: Being an associate dean was quite pleasant. The negative was that it took me out of some teaching. I taught less, but I consistently taught almost as much as everybody else. So, that wasn't a dramatic change. I didn't have the opportunity to do much writing, and maybe I used it as an excuse, because writing is always a chore. I hadn't begun studying foster care, the area from which I generated a lot of publications later.

Being acting dean the first time was during a semester while Dean Chernin was abroad. That semester was a piece of cake, everything went fine. The next time I was acting dean was in the middle of the difficult time, 1969, the worst time at Cal that I can imagine. You know, everybody was just torn apart by the dissent. It all went back to the free speech movement. How can we characterize those times? It was labeled the reaction against authority symbolized by the draft forcing young men to take part in a war they believed wrong, considered both criminal and immoral. Everybody past 30, as you remember, maybe it was 40, was suspect as having sold out to a system that was inherently immoral and destructive.

Sometimes even now when I hear a helicopter overhead I have a deja vu flash to the times of the helicopters and the police on the campus. And the tear gas. Once in a while when I smell tear gas, I have a flash back to that time rather than realizing

somebody is just practicing. You don't very often smell tear gas, but if you do you know what I mean. You tend to flash back to the time when tear gas was very emotional to you, because it meant that there was just a terrible time going on on campus. It was really pretty terrible.

We had boycotts and sit-ins and so forth, but those could have been ridden out fairly easily. It was the profound suspicion and separation between the establishment and the students, I mean the professors and the students, that was the real tragedy. There was profound distrust. Instead of a joyful collegiality, it was real, real antagonism. We were on the opposite side of the fence. If you said something was white, they wanted it to be black, and vice versa. That was the tragedy of it. The tragedy of a student being killed was only symptomatic, but of course dreadful. And events such as the Kent State killings happened at that time. It was a period of enormous problems on campus. I happened to be acting dean at the very worst part of it. Believe me, I would not have chosen it if I had known what was coming.

I hope I am covering most of your questions tonight. I am trying to be fairly brief.

ISABELLE: Maybe we should move into sort of your current involvement. Before we do that, have we missed something during your Cal years? We have covered a variety of projects, things you have done and certain aspects of academia. Have we missed anything about your years at Cal?

KERMIT: I don't think so. I think that if I had it to do over again, obviously I would have been maneuvered not to be acting dean at that time. In retrospect I don't regret it, because somebody had to be, and you have got to go through fire to appreciate the cool.

Cal Berkeley has put itself back together. As you know, the campus in general has become too extreme in the other direction, conservative. Activists have great difficulty getting a demonstration going about anything. The other day a group was trying to demonstrate about the need for ethnic diversity. The thing they were complaining about was not enough black, not enough Chicano professors, and so forth. They had a little demonstration going on by the chancellor's office, but was pitifully small. A handful of people. They looked dispirited. In 1969 when there was a demonstration, you knew it. You could hear it coming. It was like a storm. You'd hear a rah, rah, rahing going on and you knew something was happening. Often a demonstration was precipitated by the police on campus. Now, the misuse of police was part, and the military draft was part of the whole thing. It certainly could have been kept much cooler and in retrospect it could have been. Loss of civility was the first outcome. In the School we had some real loss of civility.

I have never for a moment regretted coming to Cal even though there were times I said to myself, "I should have gone to a school that was less demanding, that emphasized practice more, and so on." But if I thought about it a little longer I'd say, "No, Cal is still"--Dean Chernin in his arrogance expressed it most pointedly in saying, "This is the major league and you don't want to go to a minor league." He always had these wonderful analogies. To some extent that's true and retrospectively I think I've been very lucky.

Public social service systems

BOB: This is not on the academic career, but I was wondering in your working with public social service systems, do you have any comments about how those systems operate?

KERMIT: Not very good ones anymore. When I retired in '82 I lost many of my connections. They have been so sporadic since then. I was on the board of an advocacy agency in San Francisco until two years ago. I was in contact with the San Francisco Social Service Department at the commission level. I thought the leadership was not very good. The administration spent most of its effort on defensive maneuvers rather than program development. They were always covering their backsides rather than dealing with issues. It was very difficult to gain the confidence of either the social work community or the power structure.

I am troubled by the fact that the social services financing has fallen so far behind reality that there is simply, at least in my perception, the agency can do a good job. When I was first in foster care in San Francisco in 1970-73, the caseloads were manageable. Personally, I would have liked to have taken on a caseload. They were about 25 cases in the average child welfare caseload. I think I could have had a plan going on every case, with a direction set. Perhaps instead of writing about foster care, I should have first proved what I could accomplish. I don't know if we will ever again see a situation so promising.

Public funding, of course, has fallen way behind need and it is ridiculous to talk about effective case management when a case worker is trying to manage 50 cases. It is not feasible. The human mind can't keep that much in focus, simply cannot. There is only a limited amount of concepts you can keep in your head at one time, something like six or seven conceptual ideas going at one time. It is not possible to expand one's intellectual grasp to control so many discrete events or pieces of information.

When I was teaching I said I wouldn't try to teach anything I couldn't do myself. I wouldn't try to say anything to anybody in public welfare I didn't think I could do if I had the time and

the opportunity, and I tried to test that out in summer projects. I first wanted to show myself I could do it before I'm willing to stand up and say it can be done. But, I can't say that anymore. It has been since 1980 that caseload demands have gotten so out of hand.

Current Activities

BOB: What activities have you done since you retired?

Aid to Adoption of Special Kids

KERMIT: I was on the board of an advocacy organization in San Francisco for several years. I am very active on Aask America which means Aid to Adoption of Special Kids. We had a board meeting just last weekend. It's a very effective effort in special needs adoption. We place kids that nobody else will place. We have, I think to some extent, pioneered a few things, such as we moved right ahead on accepting single parents as adoptive parents. We have a policy of accepting gays and homosexuals. Most important, we have proved no child is unadoptable.

I understand that there are counties that still don't accept single parent adoptions. I don't know if that's true or not, I'd like to know. Research shows that single parents are fully as successful, in fact they are choice parents for certain kids. We place, for example, Downs Syndrome kids. No problem. Twenty years ago you wouldn't have thought of them as adoptable.

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We have struggled with the issue of trans-racial adoption over the years. We have a policy that trans-racial adoptions will be considered only when the child would otherwise have to grow up in foster care. The black social worker's organization, and various black advocates oppose any trans-racial adoption saying it is better for a child to grow up in foster care than to be placed in a white home. Since 1950 I have done a 180 degree shift on this point. I think it is plain nonsense that we import 11,000 kids a year from Guatemala and other places where kids are almost as black as most American black children.

However, this is such a politically sensitive issue that we have to tread very cautiously in developing policy. Aask tries to exert leadership in this and other sensitive areas. It is good to be associated with an agency that I think is out front rather than dragging behind.

Court Appointed Special Representatives

CASR means Court Appointed Special Representatives. I have been a board member since it began. Contra Costa was the first county

in the state that had a county-wide program. We recruit and train volunteers who serve as advocates for dependent children before the court, usually abused or neglected kids.

It's a program that I at first doubted would work. I was dubious about it on two or three grounds. One is that I knew that many social workers would feel that their work was being infringed upon by a volunteer who was not educated. That issue has gradually, I think, melted in most counties. Most social workers welcome this kind of teamwork with a CASR. The CASR has the time and the enthusiasm to become truly identified with the child and an advocate for the child. I think it is a sound idea an innovative idea.

ISABELLE: And what else do you do?

Church council

KERMIT: I am chairman of our church council. The last thing that I ever expected to do was to have a leadership role in a church. I could take it or leave it alone. Jane was the real Lutheran in the family. It kind of by default got put on me and I spend a lot of time at it. We are trying to do all kinds of things which are important and I generally have respect for the Lutheran church and it's programs.

Did you read in the paper this morning about Bishop Miller? That's our bishop, Lyle Miller. A young man who is at the Lutheran seminary in Berkeley is an open practicing gay. e has asked for ordination. The Lutheran church is trying to determine its position. At this point the vast majority in the church are saying we can't ordain gays. And Lyle Miller, even though this young man came from his parish and they are personal friends, has to say he can't be ordained. That's the kind of dilemma that leadership puts you in. And it is an issue splitting apart some parishes. All churches are, or soon will be, having to deal with this issue.

Jane Wiltse

BOB: You remind me that you have never told us about meeting your wife.

KERMIT: I met her by accident at a dance to which I took another girl. This was in Fargo, North Dakota. I had known her brother as we had attended the University together. Also so we grew up within 11 miles of each other and we were delivered by the same country doctor. At this dance a circle two-step was called and that's the way we met. Another chance occurrence with an exceptionally wonderful consequence.

We believe we will make it to 50. If we make it to 50, I will be the fifth sibling to have celebrated his or her fiftieth anniversary. That's some kind of stability, isn't it?

ISABELLE: What would you like to tell us about your family? Anything else besides what you have just told us now?

KERMIT: We are very fortunate. Jane and I have three boys, two are married. One of them has two children. One has one. My youngest son [Eric] is not married, lives at home. Each summer we get together at some place like Sea Ranch and have a wonderful time. We are such good friends. Spending a week together we look back on and say, "Gee, you know, it is kind unusual to get along so well." I have two wonderful daughters-in-law and we are just crazy about our grand-kids. After all, the best reason to be parents is to have grandchildren.

Comments on a career in social work

I have had quite a satisfying career. I have never had to do anything I was apologetic about. I see these people who have to advertise hemorrhoid medicine or something like that. How would you like to make a living that way? It is worse than social work. Or sell false teeth?

ISABELLE: Which leads me into our last question. Segue. What has sustained you through your social work career? You have kept growing. You still are a social worker.

KERMIT: Even though she would never take credit for it, Jane is part of it. It was just so good to have somebody like Jane in my life. But, on the more professional level, I think I learned very early, more or less well, the truism that one has in this world only what he has succeeded in giving away. Social work is pretty much a giving and commitment profession. You've got to give an awful lot; energy, time, attention, and I find that I still enjoy doing just that. Today at ACLU I was doing a lot of counseling over the phone with people who had all kinds of personal dilemmas, legal sorts of dilemmas. But, just to help the people and I suppose, very frankly, to be rewarded with, "That's helped a lot." That's always been enough reward for me, a payback for what you have given. I think we have always been very lucky being able to give a lot to our kids and to get a lot back.

BOB: For both of us I would like to thank you for participating in this.

KERMIT: Well, it has been fun.

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